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The Profitability of Plagiarism: A Look at University Plagiarism Policies Across the Country

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Abstract

Like health care, higher education is one of the relatively few areas where for-profit, public, and nonprofit organizations directly compete with one another. This creates a robust policy debate about the role of for-profits in the delivery of educational services, and provides a window to study widely believed but mostly untested views about differing institutional behaviors in different sectors. Prior literature has found mixed results about student outcomes from for-profit colleges, and existing data on educational quality across sectors have yet to be identified. In this study, we coded various information from the written academic dishonesty policies of a large random sample of American universities issuing bachelor's degrees. We hypothesized that the profit motive would tend to push for-profit colleges to prize tuition dollars over policing academic integrity norms, which would push for-profit colleges to adopt policies that impose more lenient punishments for students caught in misbehavior. Our data did not support this hypothesis, as we did not find for-profit college policies to be distinguishable from nonprofit or public college policies in severity of punishment. However, religious affiliation was statistically significant with a more *lenient* maximum penalty, and in some models, the percentage of staff devoted to student support and the graduation rate were associated with stricter minimum penalties. The data also indicate that Cleveland State University's policies on academic misconduct are among the most lenient in the United States, particularly with regard to assignments worth less than 25% of the course grade, which suggests that it may be time to revisit this university's approach to plagiarism.